

APPLICATION FOR UNITED STATES LETTERS PATENT

FOR

**A SINGLE STAGE, LEVEL RESTORE CIRCUIT
WITH MIXED SIGNAL INPUTS**

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BACKGROUND

1. Field of the Invention

[0001] Embodiments of the present invention relate to integrated circuit design, and, more particularly, to input processing of mixed-signal.

2. Description of the Related Art

[0002] Presently, integrated circuit technology is such that circuit designs are able to process data at rates which challenge the ability to provide input data to keep the circuit designs at a high operating efficiency. Thus, the frequency of data transfer between circuit designs continues to increase, resulting in increase signal frequencies. This increase in signal frequency applies to both interchip or intrachip communication. For example, an address generation circuit in a processor may be in need of obtaining a cached address from an on-chip cache. With the operating frequency of the address generating circuit rapidly increasing with successive generations of integrated circuit technology, providing timely data from the cache to the address generating circuit may be a challenge. Thus, the communication link between the cache and the address generation unit may attempt to use a high-speed communication link.

[0003] Differential signaling, as opposed to single ended signaling, provides advantages that may result in an increased maximum operating frequency. In differential signaling, typically two component signals (sometimes referred to as

differential pairs) are used to transmit data instead of one signal, as with single ended signaling. The data value on a differential pair is represented as the difference between the voltage on the two signal components. An example of a common differential signaling protocol is low-voltage differential signaling (LVDS). LVDS uses high-speed analog circuit techniques to provide data transfers on interconnects at hundreds or even thousands of megabits per second. LVDS is a generic interface standard for high-speed data transmission.

[0004] Differential signaling provides a number of benefits. Many noise sources are not local to a differential pair. Thus, these noise sources will affect both signals of the differential pair relatively evenly. By affecting both signals of the differential pair relatively evenly, the difference between the two signals will remain relatively constant. Thus, differential signaling provides improved noise immunity compared to a single wire solution. Other advantages are associated with differential signaling as well. When low voltage differential signaling is utilized, the low voltage differential allows for higher switching speeds when compared to large voltage differential signaling and single ended signaling. Thus, differential signaling provides advantages over traditional single ended signaling and is therefore utilized to provide a high-speed communication link between a source and a destination function block.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0005] Embodiments of the present invention will be described referencing the accompanying drawings in which like references denote similar elements, and in which:

[0006] FIG. 1 illustrates a prior art, mixed signal circuit that combines a level restore function with a logical AND function.

[0007] FIG. 2 illustrates an improved design with mixed signal inputs for a level-restore circuit with a logical AND function, in accordance with one embodiment.

[0008] FIG. 3 illustrates an improved design with mixed signal inputs for a level-restore circuit with a logical OR function between a small signal pair and a large signal.

[0009] FIG. 4 illustrates is a block diagram of a computer system including a level restore circuit with mixed signal inputs, in accordance with one embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

[0010] In the following description, various aspects of the embodiments of the invention will be described. However, it will be apparent to those skilled in the art that other embodiments may be practiced with only some or all of these aspects. For purposes of explanation, specific numbers, materials and configurations are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of these embodiments. However, it will also be apparent to one skilled in the art that other embodiments may be practiced without the specific details. In other instances, well-known features are omitted or simplified in order not to obscure the description.

[0011] The terms metal line, trace, wire, conductor, signal path and signaling medium are all related. The related terms listed above, are generally interchangeable, and appear in order from specific to general. In this field, metal lines are sometimes referred to as traces, wires, lines, interconnect or simply metal. A signal is an electrical signal that is carried on the metal lines, traces, wires, conductors, signal paths and signaling mediums.

[0012] As previously discussed, low voltage signaling uses low voltage signals to transfer data. This transfer may be via signals between devices in a multi-chip module or devices on a circuit board. Alternatively, the transfer of data via signals may be between blocks of a circuit design on a single integrated circuit. That is, an integrated circuit may be arranged into multiple circuit portions, e.g. blocks. Low voltage signaling may be utilized to facilitate communication of signal values between these blocks.

[0013] Designs utilizing low voltage signaling to transmit signals may do so to provide for an increase in the operating frequency of a circuit. Certain of the signals represented by low voltage signals, may be on a “critical path” of the circuit. That is, the low voltage signals may be on a signal path of the circuit that is defining the upper limits on the operating frequency of that circuit. Thus, it may be desirable to try to improve the operating frequency of a signal path involving these low voltage signals.

[0014] Low voltage signals are generated and supplied on signal traces by a transmitting block. The low voltage signals may be of the order of tens or hundreds of millivolts. The low voltage signals are received by a receiving block. The receiving block provides these low voltage signals to a sense amplifier. The sense amplifier may perform amplification and level shifting. In such a case, the resultant signals are still typically “small signals” however, they may be level shifted and have a larger voltage, perhaps in the hundreds of millivolt range. Small signals still differ from large signals in that the latter are typically signals that are operating at higher voltage levels for a digital process technology in use. For example, large signals may be operating at 0 volts and 1.5 volts to represent two logic levels for a particular process technology.

[0015] As mentioned, upon receipt of low voltage signals by a portion of a circuit, low voltage signals may be sense amplifier to small signal values. After sense amplification, the resultant small signals may be level restored to large signals, e.g. digital logic level signals. The resultant large signals may be utilized in logic operations with other large signals in the circuit block. For example, a

signal may be amplified to a small signal, SS1, and then level restored to a large signal, LS1. LS1 may then be logically ANDed with another large signal, LS2, in the design. This multi stage approach to level restoring and performing a logic operation between two signals may be inefficient for signals on a critical path of a design. One method that may be utilized to improve a circuit containing such a structure is to combine the "level restore" and "logic" functions to provide a level restore circuit for mixed signals (e.g. small signals and large signals).

[0016] FIG. 1 illustrates a prior art, mixed signal circuit that combines a level restore function with a logical AND function. Sense amplifier circuit **135** (sense amp reset and equalization circuitry omitted for clarify) provides a conversion from low voltages signals on inputs A **120** and A_b **122** signals to small signals on the outputs, A2 **130** and A2_b **132**, of the sense amplifier **135** ("_b" suffix utilized to denote differential or complementary signal names). Inputs B **110** and B_b **112** are large signal inputs. Inputs B **110** and B_b **112** are ANDed with, and thus synchronized with, clock signal, Clk **140** respectively.

[0017] During a precharge phase of the clock **140** in this circuit, several signal values are precharged, or preset. Output signals, Out **190** and Out_b **192**, are precharged high via precharge devices p1 **150** and p3 **152**. Sense amplified small signals A2 **130** and A2_b **132** are precharged low by sense amplifier **135** (precharge logic not illustrated). Gate signals to N-MOSFET devices n2 **164** and n4 **168** are precharged low.

[0018] N-MOSFET devices **162-168** provide level restore and logic AND function between small signal inputs A2 **130** and A2_b **132** and large signal inputs B **110** and B_b **112**. Pull-down network **162-164** comprises an AND stack as part of a logic function for small signal input A2 **130** and large signal input B **110**. Output node **190** driven by AND stack is precharged high. In this prior art device, internal node **170** of the AND stack is precharged through device p2 **172** driven by clock, clk **140**. Internal node **170** is precharged high to avoid charge sharing complications between output **190** and internal node **170**. Note that there is no evaluation device for the AND stack. Thus, as a result of the precharging of internal node **170**, and the lack of evaluation device, to avoid direct current (DC) conduction between the power supply and ground, the input to n2 **160** must remain off during precharge. To ensure that n2 **160** is off during precharge, B **110** is ANDed with clock, Clk **140**.

[0019] FIG. 2 illustrates an improved design with mixed signal inputs for a level-restore circuit with a logical AND function, in accordance with one embodiment. Sense amplifier **235** receives low voltage signals A **220** and A_b **222** and provides amplified signals A2 **230** and A2_b **232**. In addition to providing amplification, the sense amplifier **235** precharges amplified signals A2 **230** and A2_b **232** to a low voltage during a precharge period of clock, Clk **240**. In one embodiment, sense amplifier **235** may be a ratioed P sense amplifier. Sense amplifier **235** is represented by various devices known in the art and will not be further described.

[0020] The improved design of FIG. 2 advantageously allows the input *B* **210** to drive the input to device n2 **264** asynchronously from the clock **240**. Recall that in the prior art implementation of FIG. 1, the transition the signal on the input to device n2 **164** occurs substantially concurrently with the transition of clock, *Clk* **140**. This was performed intentionally to avoid a DC conduction between the power supply and ground. In addition to the transition on the input of device n2 **264** being substantially concurrent with the clock **240**, the transition of the input to n1 **162** is, by the nature of the operation of the sense amplifier, synchronous with *Clk* **140**. Thus, in the case where n2 **160** is made synchronous with *Clk* **140**, a result is concurrent switching of the transistors n2 **164** and n1 **162** in the AND stack.

[0021] The improved device illustrated in FIG. 2 advantageously allows one of the transistors **264** in the AND stack **260** to transition asynchronously to the clock, *Clk* **240**. Indeed, in one embodiment, the large signal *B* **210** driving transistor n2 **264** is designed to transition asynchronously to the clock, **240**. This results in the elimination of the concurrent switching of the transistors in the AND stack **260**. Such concurrent switching of transistors in the AND stack **260** may produce a number of undesired effects. One effect is a slower falling transition on the AND stack's output. In a case where there is to be a high to low transition on output **290**, large signal *B* **210** and small signal *A2* **230** will both be at a "high" voltage for their respective technologies. In the case where both devices n1 **262** and n2 **264** transition concurrently, the drain to source voltage, V_{DS} , across n1 **262** does not build until the voltage at the internal node **270** is pulled down. That

is, n1 **262** will not begin to transition until n2 **264** has pulled down internal node **270**. This delay in the transition of n1 **262** results in a delay on the high to low transition of output **290**. However, if n2 **264** is allowed to transition asynchronously to n1 **262**, internal node **270** will be already driven to a low voltage by the asynchronous large signal B **210** when small signal A2 **230** transitions. When small signal A2 **230** transitions, a proper voltage is already present across the drain and source of n1 **262**. This allows for a quicker transition on output **290** when compared to the case where both n1 **262** and n2 **264** transition concurrently. Thus, by allowing n1 **264**, associated with the large signal B **210**, to transition asynchronously to the clock **240**, and thus asynchronously to the small signal A2 **230**, concurrent switching of the AND stack **260** may be eliminated. By eliminating the concurrent switching of the transistors of the AND stack **260**, a faster high to low transition can occur on the output **290** driven by the AND stack **260**.

[0022] Cross-coupled PMOS devices **280-282** may provide differential amplification functions to aid in the level restore function. Because of the precharge of outputs **290-292** to a high voltage, P-MOSFET devices **280-282** are initially inactive during evaluation of the circuit thus having no effect on outputs **290-292**. However, as a first output, e.g. **290**, begins to be driven to a low voltage, a low voltage on output **290** activates corresponding P-MOSFET device **280**. As a result of the activation of P-MOSFET device **280**, second output **292** will be driven to a high voltage. Thus, any noise that may occur on the second output **292**, e.g. as a result of noise on the output A2_b **232** of sense amplifier

235, will not be successful in driving the second output **292** to a low voltage. The result is robust, complementary outputs at digital logic levels on outputs **290-292**.

[0023] Due to the possibility of charge sharing between output **290** of the AND stack **260** and internal node **280**, precharge device p2 **274** is utilized in the circuit. The precharge device p2 **274** for the internal node **270** is a data driven precharge device. Thus, when large signal input **210** is low, precharge device p2 **274** ensures that internal node **270** is precharged to avoid possible issues associated with charge sharing between output **290** and internal node **270**.

[0024] However, when appropriate for the large signal input **210**, the improved design advantageously enables a pre-discharge of the internal node **270** prior to the sense amplifier output switching. For example, assume that, asynchronous to small signal A2 **230** switching from it's precharged low value to a high value, input B **210** transitions from low voltage to high voltage. In the embodiment illustrated, internal node **270** will discharge from high voltage to low voltage. This discharge of internal node **270** occurs asynchronous to a transition from the precharged low value on small signal A2 **230** to a high value. Thus, when small signal A2 **230** transitions to a high value, enabling n1 **262**, internal node **270** will already be at a low voltage level. In the case where both transitions occur substantially concurrently, e.g. concurrent transitions in the prior art device of both inputs to AND stack devices n1 **162** and n2 **164**, the miller effect between the gate to drain may cause gate to drain capacitance to effectively double. This effective doubling of the gate to drain capacitance may result in an increased delay in the rise of the precharged low output **130** on the sense amplifier **135**.

This, in turn may cause a delay in the transition on out_b **190**. In the embodiments illustrated in FIG. 2, by allowing internal node **270** to transition prior to the transition on small signal A2 **230**, miller effects associated with concurrent transitions on the AND stack may be reduced.

[0025] In addition to providing speed advantages, the embodiments of the improved design may also provide other advantages. For example, the improved design may reduce the total dynamic power consumption. As mentioned, the internal precharge device **274** is data driven instead of clock driven. Thus, by not having to drive the addition precharge device, the loading on the clock is reduced. In addition, as discussed above, in the improved design, a large signal **210** may arrive at device AND stack device **264** asynchronously to clock **240**. Thus, it is not necessary to AND the large signal **210** with clock **240**; thus, also reduces the loading on the clock signal **240**

[0026] Another advantage offered by the embodiments of the improved device illustrated herein is that the activity factor of the internal node **274** may be reduced. When precharged by a clock signal, the internal node is precharged every clock. In comparison, when the precharge of the internal node occurs by a large signal, depending on the activity of the large signal **210**, a reduction of the transitioning of the internal node **274** may occur.

[0027] In addition to the improved performance previously described, as illustrated, the improved design may result in an area reduction. When compared to the prior art design of FIG. 1, it can be seen that one NAND

gate/inverter pair have been eliminated. Such elimination reduces the gate count in the improved design. Thus, the improved design advantageously reduces the area required for the implementation of a level-restore circuit with mixed signal inputs.

[0028] FIG. 3 illustrates an improved design with mixed signal inputs for a level-restore circuit including a logical OR function between a small signal pair and a large signal. In embodiment illustrated, the AND stack utilizes the complementary small signal **332** and large signal **312** to generate the large signal output **390**. That is, in the previous embodiment, an AND stack was utilized to generate a NAND output. In current embodiment, utilizing complementary inputs for the small signal **332** and large signal **312**, the AND stack is utilized to generate the logical output of the negation of the NOR function, generating the logical output of an OR function:

$$A+B = \overline{\overline{A} \bullet \overline{B}}$$

Thus, the AND stack operates with A2_b **322** and B_b **312** instead of A2 **320** and B **310** as the inputs for determining the OR function. The improved device is utilized to provide a solution for mixed signals utilizing the logical OR function between small signal pair A2 **320** and A2_b **322** and large signals B **310** and B_b **312**. The pull-down network may be of sufficient complexity to represent any arbitrary logic function, e.g. exclusive NOR, multiplexor, represented by small signal and large signal inputs. Thus, it will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that the improved design of the AND stack disclosed herein can be

utilized in the pull-down network of other logic functions of small signal and large signal inputs.

[0029] Thus, the improved device disclosed herein provides a single stage, mixed signal circuit including logic function. The device provides a full-rail, digital level signal output based on a logic function of a large signal and a small signal input. The embodiments illustrated herein contains a single small signal input and a single large signal input. However, it will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that, using the teachings of the above description, embodiments employing three or more inputs may be constructed.

[0030] FIG. 4 illustrates is a block diagram of a computer system **400** including one or more level restore circuits with mixed signal inputs **402**, in accordance with one embodiment. As shown, the computer system **400** includes a processor **410** and temporary memory **420**, such as SDRAM and DRAM, on high-speed bus **405**. Level restore circuit(s) **402**, incorporated with the earlier described improved design, advantageously provides level restore and logic functionality for blocks with mixed signal inputs in processor **410**. High-speed bus is connected through bus bridge **430** to input/output (I/O) bus **415**. I/O bus **415** connects permanent memory **440**, such as flash devices and fixed disk device, and I/O devices **450**, such as a networking interface, to each other and bus bridge **430**.

[0031] Thus, a unique design of a level restore circuit is provided. While the invention has been described in accordance with a number of embodiments, the invention should not be considered so limited. One skilled in the art will

recognize that various other embodiments can be utilized to provide the advantages described herein.